UNREAL WITH DREAMLIKE RAPIDITY: JACK KEROUAC'S ROMANTIC SEARCH FOR THE FRONTIER

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Introduction

The novels of Jack Kerouac have never fared particularly well with serious academics; this may be attributed to his free-flowing spontaneous prose, or 'kick-writing' as he referred to it, or indeed the restless, unorthodox way of life that his works appear to endorse. His anti-intellectual prose style and wandering beatnik preoccupations were generated in response to the post-war changes America was undergoing as it transformed itself into a Cold War era mechanized society. Modern American values, which emphasized the accumulation of wealth and possessions, produced a reactive 'beat generation', a small group of writers such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burrows, Gregory Corso and Kerouac who reacted with existential dislocation against what they saw as middle class blandness, stability and conformity. In Kerouac's work this dislocation expressed itself through embracing a restless, romantic longing for another type of fulfillment through life on the road.

The source of Kerouac's restless motion was, however, counterpoint in origin, motivated by historical as well as modern melodies. Kerouac's imaginative flights of literary fancy, conjured in response to modern society, have seen him positioned as a Romantic writer, and it has been commonly held that his works draw on the inheritance of the 18th century Romantic Movement with its rejection of the growing industrial world and its credo that the artistic imagination was a superior form of truth. Yet Kerouac's restless searching and quest for transcendence through perpetual movement also sits comfortably within the American literary canon, and

Emerson's championed virtues of insight, revelation and avoidance of tradition. These uniquely American artistic properties are in turn closely linked to the legacy of the great frontier, a moving line upon which fishermen, fur traders, miners, cattle-raisers and farmers passed in successive waves of pioneer expansion across the continent (Turner 18). Life on the frontier demanded ceaseless adaption to meet the challenge of constantly changing conditions; this adaptation was physical, economic, and personal, as American identity was redefined at the meeting point between the known and unknown worlds. In classic American literature, men of letters such as Cooper, Twain and Melville faced the wild vastness of such unknown worlds and attempted to communicate the resultant awe to their readers. Chingachook and Uncas explored the unchartered forests of the East, Huck and Jim bisected the Mississippi heart of America on a raft, whilst Ishmael and Ahab took to the ocean as America's boundaries were extended across the seas.

The closure of the Frontier, however, in 1890, threw down a problematic gauntlet to successive generations of Americans, who were faced with the task of creating a new manifest destiny, and in doing so establishing a new identity. This would prove highly troublesome, for, as Turner argued in his famous *Turner Thesis*, the American character would continually "demand a wider field for its exercise" (18). Such a dominant legacy would not be easily discarded; the indelible markings of the older skin, although long since shed, would still leave profound and lingering impressions upon the new. The lack of a frontier line also provoked a deep impression upon the identity of modern American literature, and the works of writers such as Willa Cather, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Wright Morris attempted to examine this problem. The works of Kerouac, in particular, with their emphasis on travel and the pursuit of personal freedom appeared to chase the dwindling legacy of the closed frontier.

This is not, of course, to claim that Kerouac's literature was exclusively preoccupied with the frontier, as the origins of his writing may be attributed to a number of sources, such as mysticism, jazz, religion, and the huge societal changes brought about in the aftermath of the Second World War. While one may fruitfully examine Kerouac's oeuvre in specific relation to

such factors, however, the problematic influence of the frontier will yet linger and remain, still casting its subtle pallor over proceedings long after all other critical tools have been put away. This discussion thus chooses to address how Kerouac's romantic notions of the west, his specifically anxious obsession with perpetual movement though travelling, and his unhealthy attraction to criminality, are all the partial result of a frontier legacy. In texts such as *On The Road, Desolation Angels* and *Lonesome Traveler* one finds Kerouac's protagonists in constant motion, hurtling from the ancient deserts of New Mexico to the bohemian world of San Francisco, climbing the transcendental alpine heights of the Mt Baker National Park, and speeding across the endless Nebraskan plains. Despite the exhilarating sensations of speed and freedom that his works convey, however, Kerouac's America appears, as he described it in *On the Road*, "unreal with dreamlike rapidity" (229), an intangible, romantic vision that leaves his road characters with little but an acute sense of ennui at journey's end.

The Romantic West

The western frontier represented, for Kerouac, as it had for earlier American writers, an adventurous alternative to the perceived mothballed stuffiness of the east coast, where city dwellers lived, as Thoreau put it in *Walden*, "lives of quiet desperation" (614). Instead, as Turner argued, the "true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West" (2). It was the colonization of the western plains that furnished the forces dominating American character and Kerouac, having become disenchanted with (as he saw it) the stuffy intellectualism of Manhattan campus life at Colombia University, wished to gain a sense of identity and purpose by travelling west across land. In *On The Road,* the land calls to Kerouac, "whenever Spring comes to New York" (309), beckoning him, as it had to the pioneers; the vastness of the plains appeal to his sense of adventure, the "raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the west coast, and all that road going" (309) urging him onwards. Yet his narrative seeks to realize the west, and the adventure it conveys, by visualizing it romantically. Nebraska, formed in 1867 as the frontier line

moved across it, represented for Kerouac a romantic stage upon which pioneer pluck and gumption still existed. His descriptions embellish the lives of the local Nebraskan farm owners, so that an ageing cowboy's laughter in a roadside cafe becomes a romantic chimera, the "spirit of the west sitting right next to me" (21) with his "raspy cries" drifting "clear across the plains" and "calling Maw's name" (21).

For Kerouac, taking wing on literary flights of fancy often preceded disillusionment when such expectations became incompatible with glaring realities. The west in particular failed to fulfill his romantic hopes; a garish Wyoming street exhibition full of fat businessmen in ten-gallon hats brings particular disappointment in *On The Road,* as he laments that he felt it was "ridiculous: in my first shot at the west I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition" (33). After the street show at Cheyenne Kerouac meets a girl and romantically envisages a "nice walk in the prairie flowers" but she counters his overtures, noting that "There ain't no flowers there…I want to go to New York" (35). Just as Kerouac had romanticized the west, so rural American writers from the 1920s onwards, such as Sherwood Anderson, Harriet Monroe and Carl Sandburg had been advocating a 'revolt from the village' to exciting, vibrant cities such as Chicago and New York. This bohemian movement argued that the rural Midwest offered no hope of intellectual evolution and celebrated the dirty but exciting urbanism of the city, instigating, in turn, a gradual exodus effect among succeeding rural generations. Kerouac's dreamy expectations of the romantic west were shattered by the young he found there, who instead ironically envied his 'exciting' city life.

Yet even when gifted the chance to revel in the great western outdoors, Kerouac could not sustain such experiences for long. The closest he came to capturing the essence of the western frontier experience was during his tenure as a summer firewatch in the Mount Baker National Forest. In *Lonesome Traveller* Kerouac rejoiced in his time on Desolation Peak, describing a "river wonderland" (106), and the wild landscape he documented bore similarities with the virgin wilderness of the old west, appearing "beautiful beyond belief, a perfect blue pool twenty miles long…and the timber green and fresh everywhere" (155). In *Nature*, Emerson had defined

the great outdoors as the rightful property of every American, who could claim "all nature for his dowry and estate" (1078), and in the mountaintop passages of *Lonesome Traveller* Kerouac claims this birthright, asserting that no American should go through life without "once experiencing healthy, even bored solitude in the wilderness, finding himself depending solely on himself" (113).

It was on Desolation Peak where Kerouac fleetingly captured the essential spirit of the pioneers, governed by the confines of the wilderness, having to chop wood when it became cold and forced to sleep when the light failed. Yet this experience failed to fulfill him completely, as he started to yearn for the pleasures of urban life and human society. Just as Emerson, in *Nature*, had observed one of the paradoxes of the human condition, that one may divest himself of the bounties of nature, that "he may creep into a corner and abdicate his kingdom" (270), so in *Desolation Angels* Kerouac divests himself of his mountain solipsism, desiring to see "burlesque shows, cigars and wines and papers in a room…bacon and eggs and toast in the morning - sweet cities below" (102). Unable to stay in the mountains forever, his loneliness draws him down to face the urban world once again. From there, the only route onwards was via the road, where perpetual motion would see endless bus stations and roadside cafes take the place of pine trees and blue lakes.

Perpetual Motion

Kerouac was drawn across America by the shining promise of the land before him, just as Twain's Huck Finn reckoned he had to "light out for the territory ahead of the rest" (369). During the frontier era, the American character was uniquely driven by this principle, and would be until, as Turner noted, "a physical barrier must finally obstruct its progress" (4). This physical barrier to the territory ahead became the Pacific Ocean, where there was nowhere else to go but back the way one had come, unless one departed America by ship. Thus, lighting out for the territory ahead of the rest became a romantic dream; the Pacific representing the ultimate reality check for Kerouac and his friend Neal Cassady in *On The Road*, as

they exclaim "No more land! We can't go no further 'cause there ain't no more land!" (170) Condemned to retrace his steps by the natural ocean barriers that reined him in on either side, but unable to stay in one place for long, it was through constant movement and travel that Kerouac attempted to capture the spirit of the moving frontier line. In *On The Road,* Kerouac outlined this philosophy as "performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*" (133). While Kerouac's emphasis on perpetual movement arguably drew on the legacy of the moving frontier, it was also indicative of an impatient reaction to an increasingly static America. Kerouac thus believed that, because there wasn't time enough to do all the things he wanted, he would employ constant movement to, as he put it, 'dig' as much as possible. One had to keep moving to see everything there was to see, and for Kerouac only by speeding across the land could he 'dig' it as he wanted to. His adrenalin fueled descriptions of the cross country car journeys undertaken by himself and Cassady in *On The Road* give one a sense of speed and excitement, describing driving "at 110 and talk and have all the Nebraska towns…unreal with dreamlike rapidity as we roared ahead and talked" (229).

Yet beneath the surface, Kerouac's obsession with movement and speed lacks substance. In his narrative he glides across the country at such breakneck speeds that the backgrounds blur into one, 'unreal with dreamlike rapidity.' One gains little impression that any sensation has been captured other than speed; Kerouac's prose fails to capture the essence of the Nebraskan towns he passes. Indeed, he could just as well be in Louisiana, or California, because the landscape doesn't appear important. Kerouac's work is usually placed within the narrative genre of travel writing, and *travel* may indeed be the most apposite term to employ when discussing his focus; unlike the works of writers such as Hemingway and D.H Lawrence, who wrote in detail about the actual places they visited, Kerouac's narratives instead relay the romantic sensation of travel itself, while the towns through which he passes are flagged up as mere semantic reference points, as if he is commuting deep underground between the briefly flashing lights of subway stations. Journeying down across the border into Mexico in *On the Road,* he veers into fantasy, imagining "a big continent ahead

of us with those enormous Sierra Madre mountains we saw in the movies" which appeared to reach "clear down to Guatemala and god knows where, whoo!" (276) The passage is full of childlike, Hollywood inspired enthusiasm, romantically imagining instead of documenting the actual landscape through the power of literary description. As a counterpoint to this technique, let us consider Hemingway's account of the Spanish countryside in *Fiesta.* Jake Barnes crosses into Spain by car and Hemingway describes the promise of "long brown mountains and a few pines and far off forests of beech-trees" (78). Similarly to Kerouac, Hemingway wishes to whet the reader's appetite for the land ahead, and yet while his prose is tight, controlled, and reports what is real and concrete, it is no less evocative a passage than Kerouac's account of Mexico.

When Kerouac, in *On the Road,* travels by Greyhound bus across the Arizona desert, however, he believes he is "reading the American landscape as we went along. Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing" (100). In this passage the landscape itself is not relayed to us; one gains little more than a succession of fleeting and intangible sensations, married to an acute sense of unfulfilled desire. The same landscape, which satisfied the needs of the pioneers as they strove their way across it, is not accessible to Kerouac or his mystified longing when viewed from the moving bus. Perpetual movement was ultimately ineffectual; the road experience always ended at the bus terminal, where Kerouac's mystified longing turned to "a feeling of sadness that only bus stations have" (35). Bus stations often possess a particularly depressing quality because one disembarks at a terminal similar in appearance to the one originally departed from, no matter how grand the landscape in between. One experiences an acute sense of *déjà vu*, as if spirited back to the original point of embarkation. The epic journeys undertaken by the pioneers were therefore no longer possible because, as Webb maintained in *The Great Frontier*, "the map is finished, the roads are surveyed, and all the paths to that kind of adventure are plainly marked and tended" (372). Life on the road would gradually become nothing more than a ceaseless movement between towns, with each journey culminating in an identical looking terminus, and Kerouac, in *On The Road*, realized that he was "beginning to cross and re-cross towns in America as though…

a travelling salesman - raggedy travellings" (245).

When ceaseless movement ultimately failed to bear fruit, Kerouac made a series of attempts to satisfy his longing for the American landscape through getting off the road. Yet this too would prove frustrating; whilst attempting to camp out under the stars in Arizona the author is threatened by the law. Kerouac documents in *Lonesome Traveller* how the police cannot understand his desire to camp out in the great American outdoors, asking "what's so good about that…Why don't ya go to a hotel?" (155) Upon returning to the road he continued to find himself stopped and questioned by the police, just as his hero Jack London was arrested for vagrancy on his trampings. For Kerouac, these semi-farcical episodes engendered bitter despair; one cannot be a free-spirited road adventurer whilst being stopped every few minutes by the police. "The only thing to do", he lamented bitterly in *Lonesome Traveller*, is to sit in a room and give up your "hoboing and your camping ambitions because there ain't a sheriff or fire warden in any of the new fifty states who will let you" (156). In a changing post-war America, the local sheriff would "pick on what he sees out there on the landscape moving independently of the gasoline power army police station" (156), and in response to such authority, Kerouac perceived spontaneity, anti-intellectualism and, significantly, common criminality as necessary antidotes. In celebrating such virtues, he again drew on the earlier legacy of the great frontier.

The Spirit of the Road

The frontier was a place of genesis and rebirth, where identity could be forged and continually recreated, so that that a common criminal could become respectable and a gentleman could become an outlaw. Twain recounts this from firsthand experience in *Roughing It*, giving an account of the notorious outlaw J.A Slade, a civilized Missouri man born of good parentage who later reinvented himself on the frontier as an outlaw, becoming a "bloody, desperate, kindly mannered, urbane gentleman" (119). Kerouac similarly attempted to recreate his identity through travelling west, his travels and writings inspired by the adventurous novels of his literary hero

Jack London. Thus the traveler argot employed by London's characters in *The Road* finds its echo in Kerouac's texts; just as the hobos in London's work posses road names such as 'New York Tommy', or 'Pacific Slim' so Kerouac's travelers have monikers such as 'Mississippi Jean' or 'Montana Slim.' London's 'road kids' jump illegal rides on freight trains, engaging in running battles with the guards who try to throw them off, while Kerouac's hobos thumb lifts, climbing aboard the backs of trucks and holding on for dear life. Kerouac would doubtlessly have found the adventures of London' s hobo protagonists charming, as accounts of their wily battles with the train guards captivate and amuse, and he sought to celebrate this same anti-authoritarian road spirit through his various literary personifications of his friend Neal Cassady.

Cassady is portrayed in Kerouac's works as highly unstable, a serial bigamist who frequently abandons his different wives and children to take off on the road. In his younger days Cassady had spent time in juvenile penitentiaries for various crimes, and Kerouac documented his pathological automobile kleptomania and his bouts of dangerous high speed driving that several times almost resulted in fatalities. Unlike Kerouac's New York friends, however, who were described in *On The Road* as being "in the negative, nightmarish position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons" (10), Cassady was valorized in Kerouac's novels for his western carefree nature, his ease with women, and his existential zest and joy for living, while his criminality was celebrated as "not something that sulked and sneered" (10).

Despite his criminal flaws, Cassidy was in many ways Kerouac's literary muse, immortalized in his works as a contemporary Dionysus who "just raced in society, eager for bread and love, he didn't care one way or the other" (10). Yet London's 'road kids,' conversely, were never deified or justified in such romantic terms, and London was wary of the violence exhibited by his juvenile delinquents; his hobos steal and vandalize as they make their wild way across the land, and possess a distinctly dangerous edge. This often manifests itself into acts of violence and even attempted murder, and London sounds a note of caution in *The Road*, urging the reader to "take my word for it, watch out for them when they run in pack.

Then they are wolves" (282). The rough demands of the frontier saw lawlessness and violence abound, and Twain, in *Roughing It* and *Huckleberry Finn* satirized the lawless characters who prowled the edges of the known and unknown worlds. Yet such criminality only occurred because those on the edges of civilization needed to continual innovate and adapt to survive. Identity was thus created by meeting the demands which the times created, criminality being an unfortunate by-product of necessity when these times were especially tough. Cassady's criminality, by comparison, and Kerouac's celebration of it, appears desperate and forced, justified as representing "a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy, it was western, the west wind" (10).

While Kerouac reveled in Cassady's behavior, his novels could not help but acknowledge others' criticisms on occasion, such as in a telling passage from *On the Road* where a female friend lambastes Cassady's lack of "regard for anybody but yourself and your damn kicks" (194). There was, one suspects, little 'wild yea-saying overburst of American joy' from Cassady's victims; we are told little about the women who had to pick up the pieces when he left them behind. Tragically, and yet aptly, Cassady left a number of families and offspring behind when he passed away on the road in 1968, dying from exposure while walking along a rail track in Mexico. While for Kerouac, Cassady symbolized the spirit of the road, a 'west wind' that would blow away stagnancy and stimulate rebirth, perhaps he can best be seen, as Hipkiss argues, as a very lost young man whose "speeding dashes down the road are as much flights of panic, the fear of never making it" (38).

Confused Escapism

As the search to establish a road identity failed Kerouac, travelling became more and more a form of confused escapism from the ennui of modern life. His striking confession, in *On the Road*, that "I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion" (126) reads in many ways as his personal epithet; confusion is the one prevailing impression one gleans from Kerouac's oeuvre. In many ways Kerouac can be seen as a young man

unable to adjust to the modern world and face up to a role in society, be it husband, father, or responsible employee. Carolyn Cassady reminisced that Kerouac was "extremely uncomfortable, not to say miserable, if ever he was forced, or threatened into participation…or any responsibility" (64). Travel, for Kerouac, was escapism, just as his later alcoholism became in many ways another method to deal with reality when he became disillusioned with the road. "Escape," Carolyn Cassady argues, "was one of Jack's primary motivations" (64). Kerouac thus rarely attempted to face up to the demands of his era, and evaded (with the exception of his duty to his mother) all ties and responsibility.

Escape upon the road, however, was not always possible, as reality crept in time and again. Such travelling was often far from glamorous and in *On the Road* Kerouac describes the absurd process of making sandwiches to eat on the long bus journey home from Los Angeles to New York as "Klieg lights of a Hollywood premiere stabbed in the sky…and I was spreading mustard on my lap in the back of a parking lot" (101). Dealing with such absurdities often necessitated spinning a more romantic literary world in which to escape, and his narrative style can be seen as indicative of this. In one such passage from *Desolation Angels* he gives an account of his arrival at the port of Tangiers, and veers from simple description to paint an imagined crime scene in the style of Thurber's *Walter Mitty*, where "the patch-eyed international gem smugglers sneaked up with blue .45's to steal the Tangier harem" (334). While remembering Kerouac's love of earthly scenes, Carolyn Cassady acknowledges that "he romanticized them, always from a safe distance as observer" (64).

The facts, however, gradually began to creep into Kerouac's fiction from between the romantic interstices of his imagination; he finally began to feel depressed and lonely on the road, as ennui set in and contaminated the optimism of his prose. This impression is illustrated in a passage from *Desolation Angels,* where he laments that "I'm…34…a skid row bum with wine on his teeth and jeans and dirty old clothes, who cares?' (139) By not being able to define a role for himself, Kerouac began to drift from motel rooms to bus stations in an empty fashion, the romance eventually wearing off as he realized that he had nobody to care for him and no place to go.

While being influenced by the adventures of Jack London, Kerouac failed to anticipate his hero's warning that "life on The Road is not all beer and skittles" (314); instead, such a life would bring physical and psychological hardship.

Yet Kerouac's road books were about to, as he lamented in *Desolation Angels*, "sprout out all over America even down to high school level and be attributed in part to my doing!" (352) The road became a temporary "fad up into the mass of middleclass youth" (351), who considered the writer and his life to epitomize the essence of coolness, and Kerouac bitterly noted that this would quickly turn his road philosophy into a hackneyed, cliqued theme, "that covers up the fact that the character is unable to convey anything of force or interest, a kind of sociological coolness" (351). Thus ironically, at the very moment of his rise to fame as a novelist, Kerouac no longer wished to be associated with the road that had made him famous, leaving him instead with little choice but to follow the advice of his mother and settle for "good food, good beds, nothing more…make [yourself] a haven in this world" (390). Kerouac's last literary musings, therefore, deal with his search for a home, abandoning the road theme, which has been a failure, and attempting to settle down with his mother. The passing of the frontier ensured, as Webb had predicted in *The Great Frontier*, that the American "imagination must make its way henceforth amidst a different set of conditions", dealing with "what is well known rather than what is only vaguely known" (372). For Kerouac, the well know world of family relationships finally transposed the unknown world of the lost frontier, and he concluded in *Desolation Angels* that "a peaceful sorrow at home is the best I'll ever be able to offer the world, in the end" (397).

Conclusion

Kerouac sought to capture the spirit of the pioneers by adventuring across the great American western plains, by 'digging' as much as possible through constant movement and by associating with the unstable and occasionally criminal Neal Cassady. He rejected the pursuit of monetary gain and stability and instead looked elsewhere for personal fulfillment, full of

mystified longing for something lurking just beyond the road which was not clearly expressed. This discussion, however, has argued that Kerouac's mystified longing, while not explicitly articulated, was directed towards the world of the earlier frontier, full of confusion and self doubt as to his role in a rapidly modernizing America. There are periods in his novels, such as the passages on Desolation Peak, when he captures a sense of the pioneer lifestyle, but these moments are all too brief and he is unable to sustain them as they slip through his hands.

Despite being a hugely influential figure in the creation of a countercultural beatnik movement, when this movement grew out of his control, he came to despise it, leading him to despair, loneliness and alcoholism. Kerouac thus died as he had lived, seeking escapism from the world around him. When, in 1969, he passed away from internal bleeding caused by long-term liquor abuse he followed in a line of American writers such as Poe, Behan, Fitzgerald and O. Henry who had battled with alcoholism and lost. Yet one feels that Kerouac's alcoholism was more than a physical disease, instead being a self inflicted final solution which helped anaesthetize the bitter taste of a thwarted search to transcend his own times, and to fulfill the demands of a subtle but lingering American legacy; the legacy of the great frontier.

For all Kerouac's failings, however, and while his road novels have become for many a superficial clique, a byword for, as Norman Podhoretz famously argued "a kind of know–nothing populist sentiment" (1965 146), in one respect his literature achieves greatness. Kerouac's world may be 'unreal with dreamlike rapidity', but it is specifically and uniquely *his* version of the world that he relays to us; his works gift us a highly individualized countercultural experience which is distilled into a romantic literature through the creative powers of the imagination. Kerouac's early works are filled with the hope, anger and empathy of the young, while his later novels reveal the acute bitterness of diminishing youth and middle aged dreams unfulfilled; yet both provide us with a key sense of what it was to be disenfranchised and alienated in a rapidly changing post-frontier United States, while also being universally accessible in that they resonate with a poetic and painfully confessional honesty. Thus Kerouac's literature may not offer

one a serious road map to a practical way of life which can be lived upon the frontier road, but his work does achieve a universal emotional appeal through documenting the travails of a highly individual human being struggling to make sense of living in a confusing and difficult changing world.

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